



A Supervisory Newsletter from the Employee Advisory Service

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

The Employee Assistance Program to help you manage your most valuable resource— Employees

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Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. I have an employee who says she suffers from depression. She called to ask for time off to see a doctor. I left a message and asked her to reschedule due to workload constraints, but she never called back and never showed up. Isn't this an indication she may not really be sick?

A. Although you are frustrated with your employee's failure to communicate with you, and are therefore naturally suspicious about her absence, do not assume she is untruthful. An employee with major depression or another illness with depressive symptoms may experience lethargy so severe that aversion to activity may include not communicating with you. Your employee may care about her job and job security but her condition may leave her without the mental capacity to demonstrate it. You should respond to her performance problems or attendance issues as you would other employees, keeping in mind policies of your organization and laws regarding ill or injured employees, but do not act on unsubstantiated suspicions. It is common for supervisors to guess at the hidden meaning of certain employee behaviors. However, this diagnostic step is hazardous and should be avoided because it can expose supervisors to charges of discrimination or other unfair treatment if it influences inappropriate responses to troubled employees.

■ Q. Our organization has faced many financial cutbacks, and employees are doubling up on work. Should I refer employees who appear tired and overworked even if they are not troubled with performance problems?

A. What are you seeing or hearing that helps you make the determination that employees are tired and overworked? Are some employees irritable? Have interpersonal conflicts increased? Do negative attitudes and verbal complaints diminish morale? Is there more absenteeism? Any of these continuing performance issues may indicate the need for a supervisor referral. So it is conceivable to have troubled employees, even if there were none before the financial cutbacks. If the cutbacks are permanent, and the organization's expectations for productivity have changed for good, you will need to be concerned with helping your employees accept the new standard and its accompanying performance expectations. Some employees may not be able to adjust as quickly as others, and will need more support. Do not hesitate to use EAS to support your team, either by suggesting they contact EAS or by making supervisor referrals.

■ Q. How long after a corrective interview can I make a referral of an employee to EAS? I forgot to mention the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) when I met with my employee recently. It has now been about two weeks since the meeting.

A. If you are making a supervisor referral to the EAP, it should occur during the corrective interview with your employee. However, there is no reason why you cannot incorporate the Employee Advisory Service, your EAP, into the management of your employee's performance issues now. If performance problems are no longer evident, you may wish to remind the employee about the EAP services and strongly encourage attendance. If performance problems still exist, a more formal approach to making the supervisor referral is the way to go. Since the urgency of the original corrective interview has passed, you can expect that the employee may be less likely to see the need for your recommendation to participate in the EAP. Still, your employee deserves to know about opportunities available to help improve performance. Presumably you have taken steps to follow up with your employee to discuss improvements in performance. This is also a good time to remind your employee about the EAP.

■ Q. My employee walks off the job when she gets angry with coworkers or is frustrated by office conflicts. It's my fault because I permitted it one time so she could calm down, but she's taken it as permission to do it repeatedly. How do I intervene?

A. The goal of helping your employee find a way to calm down is a good one, but walking off the job permits her to avoid work. This may explain the appeal of leaving the job site. In other words, the problematic behavior is self-reinforcing. You can expect different behavior. Meet with your employee to establish a different expectation for managing interpersonal stress. Let her know that walking off the job is no longer acceptable because it interferes with productivity, and that you expect her to cooperate with fellow workers and manage difficulties in the office while remaining on the job site. Recommend that she consider using the Employee Advisory Service, and make a formal supervisor referral if unacceptable behavior continues.

■ Q. I am a new manager and need to make changes within the work group. I am getting a lot of resistance, although I clearly explained the need for change. I know people naturally resist change, but why?

A. There is a natural tendency for people to resist changes, both small and large. Once human beings adapt to their environment and have a predictable role within it, change will threaten valued attributes or basic human needs met by the status quo (the way things are). These include feeling in control, security, comfort, prestige, self-esteem, satisfactory relationships, and more. Although the changes you wish to implement are needed or valuable, resistance almost always occurs. Keys to making work unit or organizational change easier: anticipate employees' concerns; share your vision; involve employees in decisions whenever possible; let employees express their feelings; answer questions completely; think ahead about problems employees may have with change; maintain an "open door" policy; and, emphasize the benefits change will bring. Consider inviting EAS for a 1 - 2 hour presentation on "Managing Change" or "The Three C's: Change, Conflict & Communication."

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Visit EAS on our website at:
<http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

